Villeneuve, Team Green continue to run hot

By Tim May
Dispatch Sports Reporter

LEXINGTON, Ohio — Keep up the heat.

That's been the battle cry for Jacques Villeneuve's Player's Ltd. team the last seven weeks. As Team Green owner Barry Green said, one must strike while the iron is hot, and Villeneuve's 31-point lead in the PPG IndyCar title chase with four races to go proves his team has been stoking the boiler.

It didn't wilt through a stretch of four races on four straight weekends in the torrid month of July. And all Villeneuve will be doing today for the start of the Miller Genuine Draft 200 at Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course is sitting on the pole.

"I think it did show the strength of the team," Green said of the July run. Villeneuve won at Elkhart Lake and Cleveland during the run, was third at Toronto and rose to 10th after falling 17 laps behind because of a broken rear suspension early in the Marlboro 500.

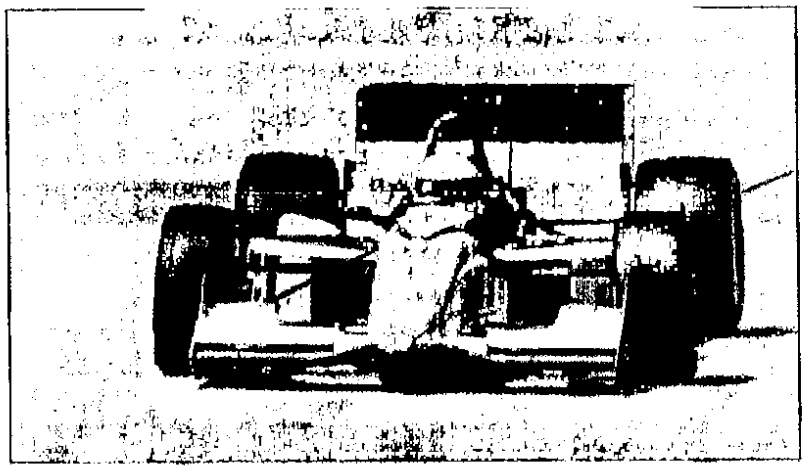
"Our challenge amongst the crew is that we would all still be talking to one another after the next four races," Green said. "And that was no joke.

"These guys literally have had one afternoon off in the last seven weeks. It's been pretty hectic."

Focus is the key, Green said. But it would seem that focus could be tested by Villeneuve's sudden announcement that he will be leaving for Formula One next season.

"I think that the announcement is probably going to help that situation," Green countered. "I know Jacques certainly isn't thinking more of Formula One than he is of winning this championship.

"We made up our mind a couple of races after Indy that it was within our grasp, and that as a group that's what we had to focus on. We couldn't be conservative. We had to go for podium finishes."



John Knouff/Dispatch

Scott Goodyear, driving for Tasman Racing, qualified 19th.

■ **GORDON'S LEAP** — Robby Gordon seemed to be tooling around stuck in the 9-10-11 area of the speed chart until pitting with a few minutes left in the qualifying session.

"I'm going to run a 68-flat," he told his pit crew, and he took off.

His lap of 68.008 seconds pushed him up to fifth, and led one of his crew members to quip: "Why didn't he say 67-flat?"

■ **FIRESTONES FADE** — Coming off its first victory in its return year to IndyCar racing, it would have to be argued that Firestone tires faded in the heat of the last two afternoons at Mid-Ohio. And Ford-powered cars seemed to thrive.

Tasman rookie Andre Ribeiro had the quickest time in morning practice yesterday in his LCI Reynard-Honda. But as the air temperature moved above 90, his Firestone tires seemed to loosen their grip and he wound up 12th on the grid, highest for Firestone-shod car.

It was the same story for his part-time teammate Scott Goodyear, who ended up 19th. Even Firestone test driver Scott Pruett, who earned that win at the Marlboro 500 two weeks ago, had trouble. He was 21st.

"We never got a good lap on the second set of tires," Goodyear said. "We were struggling with the overall grip. I'm disappointed to be where we are in qualifying."

As for the engines, Gil de Ferran, who wound up sixth, was the highest qualifying Mercedes, followed by Al Unser Jr. (eighth) and Bobby Rahal (ninth). Fords have powered 11 of the 13 race winners so far this season.

■ **WHY 3 P.M.?** — Today's IndyCar race will start just after 3 p.m., the third straight late-afternoon start this season. Though it would seem to be a tad inconvenient for the fans on hand — 70,000-plus are expected today — it's just right for ABC national television, Miller Genuine Draft spokesman Tom Blattler explained. MGD is the primary sponsor of the event.

■ **AHEAD OF THE MASSES** — Meno Gidley of San Jose, Calif., took the lead on the first lap of a Formula Ford 2000 race that featured 60 cars yesterday and went to win the 22-lap, late-afternoon adventure.

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